

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
WESTERN DISTRICT OF TENNESSEE  
EASTERN DIVISION

JUSTIN ADAM GUESS, )  
Plaintiff, )  
VS. )  
RUSSELL STRAY, ET AL., )  
Defendants. )  
No. 16-1128-JDT-cgc

**ORDER PARTIALLY DISMISSING COMPLAINT AND  
DIRECTING THAT PROCESS BE ISSUED AND SERVED ON DEFENDANT STRAY**

On May 31, 2016, Plaintiff Justin Adam Guess, who is currently incarcerated at the Hardeman County Correctional Facility in Whiteville, Tennessee, filed a *pro se* complaint pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983 and a motion for leave to proceed *in forma pauperis*. (ECF Nos. 1 & 2.) The complaint concerns Guess's previous incarceration at the Northwest Correctional Complex (NWCX) in Tiptonville, Tennessee. On June 3, 2016, the Court granted leave to proceed *in forma pauperis* and assessed the civil filing fee pursuant to the Prison Litigation Reform Act, 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(a)-(b). (ECF No. 4.) The Clerk shall record the Defendants as Counselor Russell Stray, Assistant Warden Melvin Tirey, and the NWCX.

Guess alleges in his complaint that on or about December 9, 2015,<sup>1</sup> he was being extorted by other inmates at NWCX who were gang members, which caused him to fear for his life. (ECF No. 1 at 2.) He alleges his family also was being threatened, so his mother called the NWCX and

<sup>1</sup> The complaint lists the date as December 9, 2016. That would have been over six months *after* the complaint was filed; therefore, the Court presumes the 2016 date is an error and the correct date is December 9, 2015.

spoke with Corporal Ward, after which Guess went to “pending protective custody.” (*Id.*) Guess further alleges that he told Defendant Stray specifically that he was being extorted and also had been hit by “Crips” gang members and that he afraid for his life. (*Id.*) Defendant Stray allegedly laughed at Guess and denied him placement in protective custody. (*Id.*) However, Guess alleges that, when he returned to the compound after being denied protective custody, he was severely beaten by inmate gang members. (*Id.*) Guess’s injuries allegedly were so severe that he had to have “surgeries” and was in an intensive care unit for some period of time. (*Id.* at 2-3.) The injuries required six screws and pins to be put in Guess’s face, and he also lost some teeth. (*Id.* at 3.) At the time the complaint was filed, he stated he still had “[one] surgery to go.” (*Id.*) Guess alleges that if he had been given protective custody the attack would not have happened. (*Id.*)

Guess further alleges that Defendant Tirey spoke “off the wall” to him, saying that Tirey was retiring, did not care what happened to Guess, and that if Guess was not a man and could not fight, then he should just go back out on the compound and “bend over [and] be gay.” (*Id.* at 2-3.) It is unclear from the complaint whether Tirey made these statements before or after the attack on Guess.

Guess seeks compensatory damages and injunctive relief, including transfer to protective custody or another prison. (*Id.* at 4.)

The Court is required to screen prisoner complaints and to dismiss any complaint, or any portion thereof, if the complaint—

- (1) is frivolous, malicious, or fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted; or
- (2) seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief.

28 U.S.C. § 1915A(b); see also 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B).

In assessing whether the complaint in this case states a claim on which relief may be granted, the standards under Fed. R. Civ. P. 12(b)(6), as stated in *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 677-79 (2009), and in *Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 555-57 (2007), are applied. *Hill v. Lappin*, 630 F.3d 468, 470-71 (6th Cir. 2010). “Accepting all well-pleaded allegations in the complaint as true, the Court ‘consider[s] the factual allegations in [the] complaint to determine if they plausibly suggest an entitlement to relief.’” *Williams v. Curtin*, 631 F.3d 380, 383 (6th Cir. 2011) (quoting *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 681) (alteration in original). “[P]leadings that . . . are no more than conclusions . . . are not entitled to the assumption of truth. While legal conclusions can provide the framework of a complaint, they must be supported by factual allegations.” *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 679; *see also Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 555 n.3 (“Rule 8(a)(2) still requires a ‘showing,’ rather than a blanket assertion, of entitlement to relief. Without some factual allegation in the complaint, it is hard to see how a claimant could satisfy the requirement of providing not only ‘fair notice’ of the nature of the claim, but also ‘grounds’ on which the claim rests.”).

“A complaint can be frivolous either factually or legally. Any complaint that is legally frivolous would *ipso facto* fail to state a claim upon which relief can be granted.” *Hill*, 630 F.3d at 470 (citing *Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319, 325, 328-29 (1989)).

Whether a complaint is factually frivolous under §§ 1915A(b)(1) and 1915(e)(2)(B)(i) is a separate issue from whether it fails to state a claim for relief. Statutes allowing a complaint to be dismissed as frivolous give “judges not only the authority to dismiss a claim based on an indisputably meritless legal theory, but also the unusual power to pierce the veil of the complaint’s factual allegations and dismiss those claims whose factual contentions are clearly baseless.” *Neitzke*, 490 U.S. at 327, 109 S. Ct. 1827 (interpreting 28 U.S.C. § 1915). Unlike a dismissal for failure to state a claim, where a judge must accept all factual allegations as true, *Iqbal*, 129 S. Ct. at 1949-50, a judge does not have to accept “fantastic or delusional” factual allegations as true in prisoner complaints that are reviewed for frivolousness. *Neitzke*, 490 U.S. at 327-28, 109 S. Ct. 1827.

*Id.* at 471.

“*Pro se* complaints are to be held ‘to less stringent standards than formal pleadings drafted by lawyers,’ and should therefore be liberally construed.” *Williams*, 631 F.3d at 383 (quoting *Martin v. Overton*, 391 F.3d 710, 712 (6th Cir. 2004)). *Pro se* litigants and prisoners are not exempt from the requirements of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure. *Wells v. Brown*, 891 F.2d 591, 594 (6th Cir. 1989); *see also Brown v. Matauszak*, No. 09-2259, 2011 WL 285251, at \*5 (6th Cir. Jan. 31, 2011) (affirming dismissal of *pro se* complaint for failure to comply with “unique pleading requirements” and stating “a court cannot ‘create a claim which [a plaintiff] has not spelled out in his pleading’”) (quoting *Clark v. Nat'l Travelers Life Ins. Co.*, 518 F.2d 1167, 1169 (6th Cir. 1975)) (alteration in original); *Payne v. Sec'y of Treas.*, 73 F. App'x 836, 837 (6th Cir. 2003) (affirming *sua sponte* dismissal of complaint pursuant to Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(a)(2) and stating, “[n]either this court nor the district court is required to create Payne's claim for her”); *cf. Pliler v. Ford*, 542 U.S. 225, 231 (2004) (“District judges have no obligation to act as counsel or paralegal to *pro se* litigants.”); *Young Bok Song v. Gipson*, 423 F. App'x 506, 510 (6th Cir. 2011) (“[W]e decline to affirmatively require courts to ferret out the strongest cause of action on behalf of *pro se* litigants. Not only would that duty be overly burdensome, it would transform the courts from neutral arbiters of disputes into advocates for a particular party. While courts are properly charged with protecting the rights of all who come before it, that responsibility does not encompass advising litigants as to what legal theories they should pursue.”).

Guess filed his complaint on the court-supplied form for actions under 42 U.S.C. § 1983.

Section 1983 provides:

Every person who, under color of any statute, ordinance, regulation, custom, or usage, of any State or Territory or the District of Columbia, subjects, or causes to be subjected, any citizen of the United States or other person within the jurisdiction thereof to the deprivation of any rights, privileges, or immunities secured by the Constitution and laws, shall be liable to the party injured in an action at law, suit in equity, or other proper proceeding for redress, except that in any action brought against a judicial officer for an act or omission taken in such officer's judicial capacity, injunctive relief shall not be granted unless a declaratory decree was violated or declaratory relief was unavailable. For the purposes of this section,

any Act of Congress applicable exclusively to the District of Columbia shall be considered to be a statute of the District of Columbia.

To state a claim under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, a plaintiff must allege two elements: (1) a deprivation of rights secured by the “Constitution and laws” of the United States (2) committed by a defendant acting under color of state law. *Adickes v. S.H. Kress & Co.*, 398 U.S. 144, 150 (1970).

Claims against the NWCX, a state prison, are construed as claims against the State of Tennessee. However, Plaintiff cannot sue the State of Tennessee under 42 U.S.C. § 1983. The Eleventh Amendment to the United States Constitution provides that “[t]he Judicial power of the United States shall not be construed to extend to any suit in law or equity, commenced or prosecuted against one of the United States by Citizens of another State, or by Citizens or Subjects of any Foreign State.” U.S. Const. amend. XI. The Eleventh Amendment has been construed to prohibit citizens from suing their own states in federal court. *Welch v. Tex. Dep’t of Highways & Pub. Transp.*, 483 U.S. 468, 472 (1987); *Pennhurst State Sch. & Hosp. v. Halderman*, 465 U.S. 89, 100 (1984); *Employees of Dep’t of Pub. Health & Welfare v. Mo. Dep’t of Pub. Health & Welfare*, 411 U.S. 279, 280 (1973); *see also Va. Office for Protection & Advocacy v. Stewart*, 131 S. Ct. 1632, 1638 (2011) (“A State may waive its sovereign immunity at its pleasure, and in some circumstances Congress may abrogate it by appropriate legislation. But absent waiver or valid abrogation, federal courts may not entertain a private person’s suit against a State.” (citations omitted)). By its terms, the Eleventh Amendment bars all suits, regardless of the relief sought. *Pennhurst*, 465 U.S. at 100-01. Tennessee has not waived its sovereign immunity. Tenn. Code Ann. § 20-13-102(a). Moreover, a state is not a person within the meaning of 42 U.S.C. § 1983. *Lapides v. Bd. of Regents of the Univ. Sys. of Ga.*, 535 U.S. 613, 617 (2002); *Will v. Mich. Dep’t of State Police*, 491 U.S. 58, 71 (1989).

Guess's claim that Defendant Stray failed to protect him from the attack by other inmates arises under the Eighth Amendment, which prohibits cruel and unusual punishments. *See generally Wilson v. Seiter*, 501 U.S. 294 (1991). "The Supreme Court has held that 'prison officials have a duty . . . to protect prisoners from violence at the hands of other prisoners.'" *Bishop v. Hackel*, 636 F.3d 757, 766 (6th Cir. 2011) (quoting *Farmer v. Brennan*, 511 U.S. 825, 834 (1994)); *see also Clark v. Corr. Corp. of Am.*, 98 F. App'x 413, 415 (6th Cir. 2004) ("In the prison context, the Eighth Amendment imposes a duty on prison officials to take reasonable measures to guarantee the safety of the inmates.").

An Eighth Amendment claim consists of both objective and subjective components. *Farmer*, 511 U.S. at 834; *Hudson v. McMillian*, 503 U.S. 1, 8 (1992); *Wilson*, 501 U.S. at 298; *Mingus v. Butler*, 591 F.3d 474, 479-80 (6th Cir. 2010). The objective component requires that the deprivation be "sufficiently serious." *Farmer*, 511 U.S. at 834; *Hudson*, 503 U.S. at 8; *Wilson*, 501 U.S. at 298.

To establish the subjective component of an Eighth Amendment violation, a prisoner must demonstrate that the official acted with the requisite intent, that is, that he had a "sufficiently culpable state of mind." *Farmer*, 511 U.S. at 834; *see also Wilson*, 501 U.S. at 297, 302-03. The plaintiff must show that the prison officials acted with "deliberate indifference" to a substantial risk that the prisoner would suffer serious harm. *Farmer*, 511 U.S. at 834; *Wilson*, 501 U.S. at 303; *Woods v. Lecureux*, 110 F.3d 1215, 1222 (6th Cir. 1997). "[D]eliberate indifference describes a state of mind more blameworthy than negligence." *Farmer*, 511 U.S. at 835. A prison official cannot be found liable under the Eighth Amendment unless he subjectively knows of an excessive risk of harm to an inmate's health or safety and also disregards that risk. *Id.* at 837. "[A]n official's failure to alleviate a significant risk that he should have perceived but did not" does not amount to

cruel and unusual punishment. *Id.* at 838; *see also Garretson v. City of Madison Heights*, 407 F.3d 789, 796 (6th Cir. 2005) (“If the officers failed to act in the face of an obvious risk of which they should have known but did not, then they did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment.”). The subjective component must be evaluated for each defendant individually. *Bishop*, 636 F.3d at 767; *see also id.* at 768 (“[W]e must focus on whether each individual Deputy had the personal involvement necessary to permit a finding of subjective knowledge.”).

Guess alleges in this case that he specifically told Defendant Stray that he was in danger from inmate gang members and requested protective custody but that Stray merely laughed at him. Guess was then beaten so severely by gang members that he required hospitalization and surgery. These allegations state a plausible Eighth Amendment claim against Stray for failure to protect Guess from harm.

As stated, with regard to Defendant Tirey, the complaint is unclear as to whether the comments Guess describes occurred before or after the attack on Guess. If the comments occurred after the attack, Guess has no § 1983 claim against Tirey. Verbal slurs or derogatory comments generally do not satisfy the objective component of an Eighth Amendment claim. *See, e.g., Pasley v. Conerly*, 345 F. App’x 981, 984 (6th Cir. 2009); *Jones Bey v. Johnson*, 248 F. App’x 675, 677-78 (6th Cir. 2007) (no Eighth Amendment claim for prison guard’s “use of racial slurs and other derogatory language”); *Johnson v. Unknown Dellatifia*, 357 F.3d 539, 546 (6th Cir. 2004) (“harassment and verbal abuse . . . do not constitute the type of infliction of pain that the Eighth Amendment prohibits”); *Johnson v. Moore*, 7 F. App’x 382, 384 (6th Cir. 2001) (“Allegations of verbal harassment and verbal abuse by prison officials toward an inmate do not constitute punishment within the meaning of the Eighth Amendment. Nor do allegations of verbal

harassment rise to the level of unnecessary and wanton infliction of pain proscribed by the Eighth Amendment.” (citation omitted)).

Even if the Court assumes Tirey’s comments were made prior to the attack on Guess, the complaint does not state an Eighth Amendment claim against him because Guess does not provide sufficient details about the conversation. The Court cannot determine whether Tirey’s statements are alleged to have been made in response to a request for protective custody and if so, what Guess actually told Tirey, or whether the comments were made in some other context. Although *pro se* complaints are to be construed liberally, the Court cannot speculate as to a plaintiff’s claims. Therefore, the present allegations against Defendant Tirey are subject to dismissal for failure to state a claim. However, pursuant to Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 15(a)(1), Guess may amend his complaint once as of right, without leave of Court, if he chooses to do so.<sup>2</sup>

In conclusion, the Court DISMISSES the claims against Defendants NWCX and Tirey for failure to state a claim on which relief can be granted, pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii) and 1915A(b)(1). Process will be issued for Defendant Stray on the Eighth Amendment claim for failure to protect.

It is ORDERED that the Clerk shall issue process for Defendant Stray and deliver that process to the U.S. Marshal for service. Service shall be made on Defendant Stray pursuant to Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 4(e) and Tennessee Rules of Civil Procedure 4.04(1) and (10), either by mail or personally if mail service is not effective. All costs of service shall be advanced by the United States.

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<sup>2</sup> All other amendments beyond the first require either leave of Court or written consent of the opposing parties. Fed. R. Civ. P. 15(a)(2).

It is further ORDERED that Guess shall serve a copy of every subsequent document he files in this cause on the attorneys for Defendant Stray or on Defendant Stray if he is unrepresented. Guess shall make a certificate of service on every document filed. Guess also shall familiarize himself with Federal Rules of Civil Procedure and this Court's Local Rules.<sup>3</sup>

Guess is reminded that he must promptly notify the Clerk, in writing, of any change of address or extended absence. Failure to comply with this requirement or any other order of the Court may result in the dismissal of this case without further notice.

IT IS SO ORDERED.

s/ James D. Todd  
JAMES D. TODD  
UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE

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<sup>3</sup> A copy of the Local Rules may be obtained from the Clerk. The Local Rules are also available on the Court's website at [www.tnwd.courts.gov/pdf/content/LocalRules.pdf](http://www.tnwd.courts.gov/pdf/content/LocalRules.pdf).